

# westways

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## A GRAVEYARD OF SHIPS

By Irvin Ashkenazy

**T**HE OCEAN bottoms off California's coast are littered with the bones of dead ships. A continental shelf of sunken mountains lifts to a Lorelei shore of dazzling beaches booby-trapped with hidden shoals. On a score of promontories from Oregon to Mexico foghorns moan a tocsin dirge while sentry lights stand guard by night to warn of landfalls ringed by reefs. Here is a vast arena where men have fought countless battles against the sea, where death has come in a thousand howling storms or silently in fog. But nowhere along this stretch of ungentle coast has

there been more tragedy than between Point Arguello and Point Dume at the southern end of the Santa Barbara Channel—as many a departed mariner could testify.

Death came here only yesterday, as it were, to the *La Jenelle*. That was last April 13. Her 12,500 tons, gracefully distributed over her 465-foot length and eight decks, could carry 1,000 passengers and crew. She had, in fact, during her glamorous, adventuresome lifetime, carried more passengers, her owners claimed, than any other U.S. cruise ship on record. Manned by only a maintenance crew, she lay anchored less than two miles off the coast of southern California in the Santa Barbara Channel, awaiting retirement as a floating restaurant and bar.

The first time I heard of her was when my friend, Pete Howorth, telephoned, excited and eager. "You want to see a wreck about to happen? Come on over!"

"What wreck? What are you talking about?"

"A big white passenger liner off the beach here, just west of Port Hueneme. I drove over from Santa Barbara when I heard about it. There's a sixty-knot gale blowing and twelve-foot waves knocking her around. She's dragging her anchors. She's going to pile up on the beach for sure!"

"Hasn't she any power? There's a crew aboard, isn't there?"

"Yeah, but she's got no steam up. As soon as that surf grabs her she's finished. That surf's a squasher!





Drive on up. You might make it before she hits."

Thirty minutes later the million dollar cruise ship lay stranded on her side like a beached whale, being battered into salvage by a mountainous surf. Navy helicopters from Point Mugu, battling the wind, lifted the crew to safety, one by one, from where they were clinging on the flank of the stricken liner.

That was California's last recorded major shipwreck. The first occurred 375 years ago on a wild, December day in 1595. The Spanish galleon, *San Agustin*, had crossed the Pacific, four months out of Manila, bound for Spain with a rich cargo of porcelain and silk.

Her captain, Sebastian Cermeño, took her into Drakes Bay, north of

what is now San Francisco, and dropped anchor in the shadow of Point Reyes. His objective was to search for and chart new harbors while en route—harbors in which Spanish ships might find refuge from English pirates who prowled the coast.

He went ashore with part of his crew to build a boat in which they might more readily explore the coast. But hardly was the craft completed when a flash southeaster flung their galleon upon a reef. She was soon pounded to pieces by the surf, her cargo lost and most of the men remaining aboard her drowned.

Captain Cermeño ordered the survivors aboard the new survey boat to continue the voyage south. Before he got them all aboard, however, a num-

ber deserted, preferring the perils of the wilderness to those of the sea. Cermeño and the others sailed away and eventually reached Mexico.

The deserters arrived months later with a fabulous tale of having discovered a landlocked harbor "big enough to hold all the ships of the world." But for 173 years nobody believed them. Not until the Portolá expedition "officially" discovered San Francisco harbor in 1769 was their story confirmed.

The jagged dentures of Point Reyes have chewed many a ship since then, but their sinister reputation is no more so than those of many another ship-killer along California's hazardous shore. There's St. George Reef and Bishop Rock, Point Sal and Point Conception, Point Sur and



Trinidad Head, Cape Mendocino and the Farallons, Point Fermin and Monterey, the more southerly Channel Islands, San Clemente and San Nicolas, Santa Catalina and Santa Barbara, and that fearsome foursome—the Santa Barbara Channel Islands—Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and the most westerly of all, San Miguel. And then there is Point Arguello and deadly Honda. . . .

WE SAT around one evening at Pete's home on a flank of the Santa Ynez Mountains, the lights of Santa Barbara spread below us, and traded tales of the fickle sea, its tragedies and treasures. Pete, only twenty-five, has been seaman, beachcomber, musician, conchologist, sal-

vager of wrecks and trapper of whales, marine photographer and deep-sea diver, as intimate with the sea as anyone born without fins or flippers.

"The poor old *La Jenelle*," he mused. "She committed suicide."

"Those waves helped a lot."

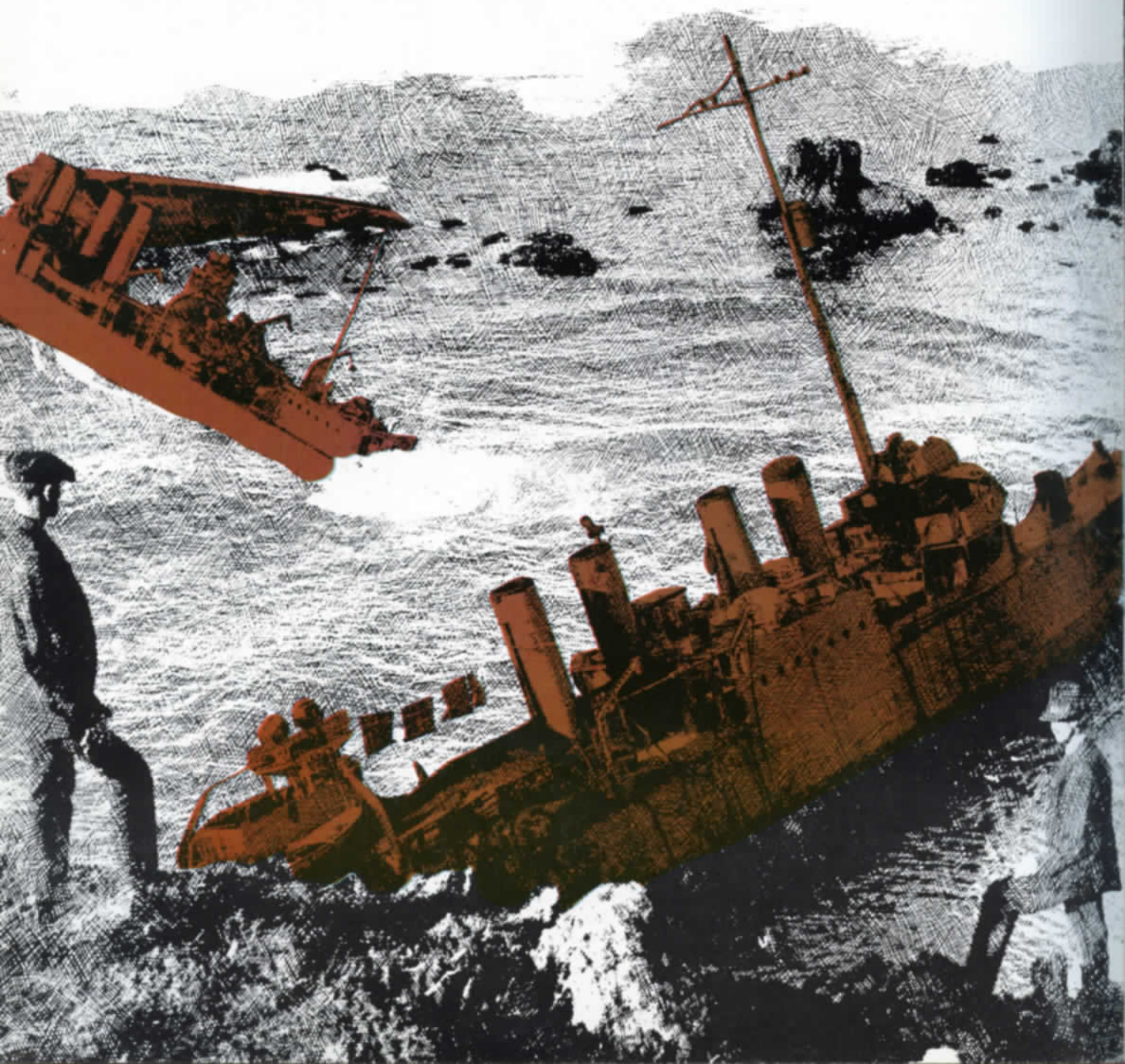
"Maybe. But she'd been anchored there for weeks in rough seas, with two hooks out on a good bottom." He shook his head. "No, it took more than weather to make her drag those anchors clear to the beach. It was a death wish. She just didn't want to end her days as a seagoing saloon. It's no life for a lady."

"You been aboard her yet?"

"No, they've got guards posted on the beach to maintain possession for the owners, I guess. Probably waiting

for the big salvage companies to put in some bids. The way the seas are running they'd better sell her soon or there won't be much left to sell."

I remembered the *Dominator*, a 10,000-tonner under Greek registry, watching her die on a reef off Palos Verdes Point in Los Angeles County only a few yards from shore. It took days for her to go. A daily assemblage of rubbernecks stood atop the cliffs watching the surf gradually batter her to pieces. Her sea-soaked cargo of grain soon swelled, burst her seams, and that was the end. Recently I skidded down a perilous path to the foot of the cliffs for a final look at the stranded hulk. Only her bow section now remains, a rusting eyesore on the stony beach. Most





stranded wrecks don't last very long. But a few stay around for quite awhile.

"There's the *Chickasaw*," Pete said, "a passenger-freighter of more than 10,000 tons. She's wedged on the rocks on Santa Rosa Island, still upright, big as life. Been there since 1962. And there's the old *Winfield Scott*, still sitting on the bottom off Anacapa Island. Scuba divers often go down for a look, but there's not much left except her frame and paddle-wheel fenders. She's been there for over one hundred years."

The *Winfield Scott* was the pride of the Pacific Mail Steamship line, a passenger liner plying the coast from San Francisco to Panama. The big white paddle-wheeler sailed out of the Golden Gate on the morning of December 1, 1853, bunting flying, band playing. Salon and decks were jammed with some 450 passengers, entrepreneurs of many varieties returning home, many accompanied by their women. Included among them were numerous miners who had struck it rich in the goldfields. The purser's strongbox was fat with deposits of currency and bullion totaling over \$800,000. It was speculated at the time that considerably more in gold dust and raw nuggets was retained in the carpetbags and money belts of scores of miners; they didn't trust pursers, and not without good reason.

The sun was bright, the sea easy, the wind fair, the company gay all the way down to Point Conception. On the evening of December 2, Captain Blunt and his first officer manned the bridge as their ship turned into Santa Barbara Channel.

The California coast runs north to south from Morro Bay to Point Conception, where it then cuts sharply east for fifty miles. South-facing shore resort towns and naval centers like Santa Barbara and Port Hueneme today look out upon the four islands that mark off the Santa Barbara Channel. Within the Channel, currents from the Bering Sea collide with those from tropic zones, and the

*The navy's greatest peacetime disaster took place in 1923 when seven destroyers were wrecked at Honda. Here, the S. P. Lee and the Nicholas*



*Destroyer Rock today—seen beyond the bones of the flagship Delphy*

northwest trades, unimpeded for thousands of miles, pirouette around Point Conception, howling havoc or bringing with them blinding fog.

And so it was with the *Winfield Scott*. She'd hardly rounded Point Conception's massive promontory when a wall of fog overtook and shrouded her. The captain called into the voice tube, ordering the engines cut to half-speed. The two officers peered grimly ahead, the ship's whistle sounding at intervals, while music and laughter drifted up from salon and dining room. As always, winter fogs and tides filled them both with anxiety born of experience with the Channel's perversities.

Toward midnight, having sailed for nearly five hours, the captain agreed that the speed of the current plus that of his ship should now place them within the Channel's eastern exit, the narrow end of the cornucopia, ten miles wide, between the mainland and Anacapa Island.

One of the smallest of the Channel Islands, Anacapa lies like a rocky sea serpent, five miles long and a half-mile wide, divided in three connected sections. The massive mesa of East Anacapa is crowned today by a Coast Guard lighthouse. But there was no lighthouse in 1853 to guide lost ships through winter fogs.

The captain took a deep breath

and ordered a forty-degree turn to starboard.

The helmsman repeated the course, gave the wheel a turn, and the liner wheeled to south southeast.

After twenty minutes on the new course the captain tensed. "Listen."

The first officer strained to hear through the throb of engines and *swash* of paddles, then he heard it too—the faint slosh of light surf dead ahead. Captain Blunt snatched the speaking tube and shouted to reverse engines. But it was already too late. The big ship shuddered, but so gently one would hardly suspect that a submerged rock had just sliced her open from bow to waist. She came to a halt, impaled upon it, less than a hundred yards off an invisible beach. Steam roared as the sea invaded the engine room, driving the black gang up from below.

Stewards ran through lamp-lit corridors shouting alarm and banging on doors. Sleep-dazed passengers stepped from bunks into cold seawater. The steamer's forward section soon rested firmly on the bottom, decks awash, her stern afloat over offshore depths, her middle hanging on the rock that had ripped her. Passengers were herded to the drier afterdeck. With the tide ebbing and the ship held fast, the captain felt that they'd be as safe aboard as ashore at present.



He ordered rockets fired, but there was little chance they'd be seen through the fog. Marconi's wireless was decades away. All that stood between a stricken ship and utter disaster was only too often an inverted flag, a flaming flare, a bursting rocket, or simply a barrel of coal oil burning on deck. And that night in the fog it was all in vain, as the next day would prove only too irrevocably.

By dawn the wind had swept the fog away. What Blunt already suspected was now confirmed: he'd overestimated the speed of the current. Far from clearing the island, they'd crashed into it near the place where East Anacapa meets Middle Anacapa.

Miraculously, not a soul was lost, although, as the day wore on, several passengers nearly drowned trying vainly to reenter submerged state-rooms to retrieve clothes and valuables. At low tide some of the crew did manage to haul the ship's strongbox up from the purser's office. Others lowered boats and rowed ashore to light fires for both warmth and smoke signals.

The hours dragged by with no ship in sight. That afternoon two young men among the passengers volunteered to row to the mainland to seek help. Captain Blunt finally acceded and put them aboard one of the dinghys. In the meantime, however, the coasting liner, *California*, en route to San Francisco, sighted the smoke on Anacapa and bore south to investigate. On spotting the wrecked ship she hove-to close by, lowered boats, and picked up passengers, crew and strongbox.

Southern California's major newspaper of the period, the weekly *Los Angeles Star*, published the news days later: "Another of the PMS Co.'s ships is wrecked on our coast . . . Baggage of passengers, together with mail, cargo, and valuable express shipments are a total loss . . . From the exposed position of the vessel she is expected to go to pieces with the first swells of the sea. . . ."

She already had. With the next high tide she'd slipped off the rock that had held her fast, slid back into deep water, and was gone, baggage, moneybelts, mail, express shipments and all.

"Nobody knows how much gold sank with her," Pete smiled, "and is probably still down there for all we know."

It is doubtful. In a hundred years that wreck must have been gone over a thousand times. But I did want to have a look at the *Chickasaw*.

"We'll go out tomorrow on the *Brother Bear*," Pete poured coffee into thick, earless, navy cups. A professional diver until nearly killed by the bends, Pete now works as a tender for other divers, his current employer being Bob McMillen, owner of the *Brother Bear*.

**B**OOKS have been written about the navy's greatest peacetime disaster. On September 9, 1923, nine of a squadron of fourteen destroyers speeding through the fog-haunted night, crashed into the jaws of Honda, just north of Point Arguello. Seven of the swift, grey ships were lost.

Pete agreed to include a visit to

Honda's environs on our itinerary. "Not that there's much left to see after forty-seven years," he said. "You'll probably see a lot more wreckage any day of the week on Point Bennett, at the western tip of San Miguel. More ships have been wrecked there than on any other spot along the California coast."

San Miguel Island lies about thirty miles due south of Point Conception, guarding the mouth of the Santa Barbara Channel. Uninhabited save by birds, marine mammals and foxes, it takes the brunt of every gale that sweeps in from the open Pacific. Its beaches have yielded Pete many a brass and copper souvenir from ships that came to grief upon them.

"Some of my best hatch covers," he observed, "have come from there."

To a beachcomber hatch covers are money in the bank. The flotsam of misfortune on nearby reefs, or the residue of disaster half a world away,

*On a winter day in 1909, the Sybil Marston sank six miles north of Honda*







Only last April the passenger liner La Jeneille met her end in gale-force winds and a raging surf. The vessel can still be seen resting just off Point Hueneme

they are among the most negotiable of the ocean's gifts. Cured and weathered by months or even years at sea, the wood may be crafted and polished to achieve an antique beauty. Pete had sold several to restaurants and seafood salons in Santa Barbara for tabletops. One restaurant owner—Larry Stone—was coming along on our cruise.

**W** E MET at dawn along Santa Barbara's splendid marina. Larry Stone, thirty-one, hardly fits the image of a worldly, genteel restaurateur. He more closely resembles a Sherman tank, with hands as calloused as a longshoreman's and muscles of solid India rubber.

By the time our gear was stowed and our engines fueled it was after 7 A.M. Pete eased the *Brother Bear* out of her slip and through the har-

bor lined with sleeping craft. Something less than thirty feet overall, she was broad-beamed for deep-sea diving, roomy and fast. As she entered the Channel her bow rose and dropped in a jarring salute to its massive swells. Pete opened her up. The twin Diesels roared as we tore westward at twenty-five knots.

The mainland slipped slowly by. Goleta Point drifted past, then Coal Oil Point with its offshore thicket of oil well platforms barely visible in the distant haze. Past Devereaux Point the smell of crude assailed the nostrils.

"There's some oil always leaking out here," Larry observed. "Always has been. The offshore drilling just makes it a little worse."

Some thirty miles later we lay abreast of Point Conception, a coast guard enclave rising 113 feet above

the sea. Upon it stands an historic lighthouse, a stubby tower lifting from a white-brick, red-roofed building that looks like an old-fashioned firehouse sitting on the lap of the promontory. Over the door of the building, facing the sea, are the numerals, "1881." That was the year it was moved from the top of the bluff to its present level to get beneath the high fog which often veiled its light. When first established in 1854 its beam could be seen for twenty-eight miles. Its 1,300,000-candlepower beacon is visible today for only eighteen miles, but can be more readily seen in foggy weather. Its rotating electric lamp uses the same lens of polished crystal as the one used with an oil lantern when it was first built.

"It was made in France. Hand ground." As a member of the coast guard reserve, Pete knows something about it. "There's a brass plate on it with the name of the man who made it—Henri Lapaute. It's been polished so much it's nearly worn away."

We rounded the corner of the continent and headed north into the teeth of the trades and the California current. Less than two miles past Point Conception, hidden from lighthouse view by a rocky spit of land, lay the wreck of a ketch-rigged motor sailer.

We all saw her about the same time, lying parallel to shore, red-painted bottom turned up toward us, flung by the sea near the point of the spit. The tide had run out, leaving her suspended in mid-air, impaled on a spire of rock.

Pete headed the *Brother Bear* toward her, conjecturing that she must have gone on the rocks only the previous night.

As we drew nearer the name and home port on her uptilted stern were clearly seen: "*Penelope* . . . La Jolla." We dropped anchor. It was too dangerous to get any closer.

Pete and Larry took the dinghy and rowed in while I remained on watch. Through binoculars I noticed something that told me that the wreck was not only abandoned, but that others, rapacious as fish hawks, had beaten us to her: her single propeller was gone. Not broken off, but



removed from its shaft—a most salable item.

When they reached the rocks Pete and Larry climbed upon them and down into the *Pentelope's* cabin. The rock on which she hung had gone halfway through her, but there was no one aboard, living or dead. Her valuable electronic gear had been ripped out, receiver, transmitter, everything. So had her power winch, boat davits and some metalwork. Larry explored her galley and reefer and emerged with three large sirloin steaks. These were as fresh as the day they'd been packaged at the supermarket, proof positive of how recently the vessel had been wrecked. She must have been visited soon after being abandoned.

PETE steered a northwest course across the twelve-mile coastal crescent that bends from Point Conception to the more massive continental shoulder of Point Arguello. Arlight, the abandoned coast guard rescue station nestling behind a crumbling jetty, was framed in the lenses of my binoculars. Behind it, amidst an esplanade of lawn, rose what seemed to have been the station's headquarters, a white manor house in the style of a Southern antebellum mansion. An air of somber isolation clung to the landscape.

Miles off our starboard a widely spaced file of missile gantrys, like weird, surrealistic sentry-boxes, paraded the coast. But, strangely, the foothills among which they stood seemed devoid of all other structures and signs of human habitation.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Pete smiled. "There's *somebody* there, that's for sure."

As if in confirmation, a gnat-sized jeep was caught in my glasses as it emerged from around a distant hill, bounding toward a gantry down an invisible road, trailing a puff of dust.

The stony thumb of Point Arguello was thrust into the sea off our starboard bow, its lighthouse set back on high ground. We rounded it, some miles offshore, and watched it fall astern. Pete held a northerly course, bearing shoreward toward Honda a mile ahead. This shallow crescent of coast is less than a mile from tip to tip, bisected by jagged spines of

*The freighter Chehalis escaped the "hounds of Honda" only to pile into the rocks off Point Conception in 1933*

black rock running from shore to sea for hundreds of yards. We moved slowly through sunlit waters toward the bluffs that ring the bight, searching for some souvenir of the navy's great disaster of 1923. But all we could see was what appeared to be a bundle of bent and twisted metal ribs rusted to the color of the rocky crevice into which they were jammed.

"The rest of it," Pete said, pointing overside, "is all down there."

Just north of Point Arguello, a few hundred yards offshore, a great black boulder protrudes from the sea. This is Destroyer Rock, the only visual reminder of one of the navy's most horrendous peacetime catastrophes, when she lost by blunder in five minutes more combat ships than were lost to enemy action during all of World War I.

The design for disaster was begun a week before, on September 2, 1923, when a great earthquake nearly wiped out Tokyo and Yokohama. Almost at once American scientists on the Pacific Coast noted sharply

*Opposite page, the Santa Rosa split in two on Honda's rocks. Thirty-five lives were lost in the July, 1911, tragedy*

abnormal changes in tides and currents lasting for days.

In the small hours of Saturday morning, September 8, the destroyer *Reno* stood out through the Golden Gate bound for the naval base at San Diego. Four hours later Destroyer Squadron Eleven formed off San Francisco Lightship also bound for San Diego. Led by squadron flagship, *Delphy*, the fourteen four-stackers sailed on an endurance run, their commander, Captain Edward H. Watson, envisioning a big Red "E" for Excellence in Engineering and an admiral's stripes at its end.

But at 3 P.M. the fog closed in; by 4:30 visibility was zero. Capt. Watson ordered all ships to form a column astern, following the *Delphy* in single file at a sustained speed of twenty knots.

Meanwhile, as the destroyers sped south, the luxury liner, *Cuba*, was steaming north, en route from Panama to San Francisco, with an \$800,000 cargo of coffee, \$2.5 million in silver bullion, and nearly 200 men,





women and children.

At 4 P.M., when the *Cuba's* first officer relieved the second officer's watch, visibility was less than a quarter mile. The second officer had calculated by dead reckoning that their course outside the channel would take them around Point Bennett with room to spare. He'd estimated that the southerly flowing current, though slowing them down, would serve to help keep them from danger by forcing the ship away from the island. Neither he nor First Officer C. H. Wise could have known then that an earthquake 7,000 miles away had diverted the current enough to cancel out their calculations. Their speed was not only greater than they realized, but they were closer to the island than they believed.

Wise would have liked to have taken bearings from the navy's new radio direction-finder station at Point Arguello, but the ship's radio transmitter had been out of commission since leaving San Cristobal.

The second officer glanced out at the fog as he turned to leave. "Captain Holland's grabbing a catnap. He left word to call him if it got thick."

"Then you'd better call him now." The first officer peered out, trying to resolve uncertain glimpses of vague masses more felt than seen through fleeting rifts in the boiling fog. Suddenly the big liner lurched and came to a grinding halt, toppling Wise, the helmsman, and everyone and everything not fastened down.

It was no use signaling "full speed

astern." They were hard aground on a rocky reef, plates ruptured and keel broken. The bridge watch could now make out through the swirling mists the massive dunes and eroded bluffs of Point Bennett some 400 yards dead ahead.

At 5:30 P.M., the *Reno*, speeding due south, passed fog-shrouded San Miguel Island a mile west of Point Bennett. Lieutenant Commander David Barry peered through the bridge's bedewed windows as he put the island behind them, before ordering a southeast turn to follow the slant of the coast toward San Diego. It was far safer sailing the open sea, he felt, than trying to thread the needle of the Santa Barbara Channel blind.

"Looks like a vessel off our starboard bow, sir," the quartermaster said.

Barry peered at the craft developing out of the fog a quarter mile away. It was creeping westward and he thought at first it was a fishing boat. As they passed, he had a clearer look. "It's an open boat—a lifeboat full of people! Hard starboard!"

The destroyer wheeled in a full circle, drifting to a halt behind the lifeboat whose passenger-oarsmen pulled toward the *Reno* with renewed vigor.

The lifeboat commander, W. J. Owens, the *Cuba's* chief engineer, told Barry what had happened, how the first few boats had made the beach through the towering surf, the next two being smashed to kindling

upon the shore. He thought most of the passengers had made it, however. A unique hazard faced the survivors, Owens related. The beach was filled with thousands of sea lions, the aggressive bulls charging the castaways. The surf had become so wild that First Officer Wise, commanding the lifeboat just ahead of his, headed around the tip of the island trying to find a more protected shore. Owens ordered his oarsmen to follow but they couldn't keep up. "We got turned around a few times and lost him in the fog. But from the direction of the current, I knew we'd made the channel."

Barry stared. "The channel? Mister, you were headed for Japan!"

Days later it was discovered that Wise and his people, equally dis-

*The author's party descends into the hold of the freighter Chickasaw, impaled on the rocks of Santa Rosa Island during a storm in February, 1962*





oriented, had been picked up by an oil tanker miles at sea and taken on to San Francisco.

By the time the *Reno* arrived off Point Bennett, the *Cuba* was already down by the head, seas breaking completely over her. The sun was going down but there was enough watery light filtering through the mists to reveal her empty davits and abandoned decks. Beyond the line of breakers on the beach, herds of sea lions mottled the white sand. Groups of people could be glimpsed through the wind-tattered fog, huddled along the sides and tops of dunes.

Barry contacted the navy wireless station at Point Arguello, gave the *Cuba's* position, and requested aid from the Arlight Rescue Station and any ships in the vicinity. "Have anchored and am sending landing parties to pick up survivors," his message concluded. "*Cuba* sinking in heavy seas."

The world thus learned of the *Cuba's* fate as pleas for assistance were relayed from ship to shore and ship to ship, filling the air with wireless traffic from San Francisco to San Diego.

The destroyer squadron was then more than sixty-five miles north of Point Arguello, running through the fog at twenty knots six miles offshore. When the *Delphy's* wireless reported the SOS, some of her officers wanted to run full speed to aid the liner. Captain Watson vetoed the idea. From the volume of messages, he was certain help aplenty was standing by.

The wireless traffic bothered the navigation officer, Lieutenant Blodgett. He'd been trying in vain to break in to get a radio bearing from the station at Point Arguello. Some of the older officers, skeptical of such new-fangled gadgets as radio direction-finders, asserted that long established procedures plus common sense were far less subject to error.

Lieutenant Blodgett kept on trying. At 8:30 P.M., by estimating his nautical speed plus that of the south-sweeping current, he had calculated that the squadron must surely have passed Point Arguello. Captain Watson agreed.

At 8:39 the *Delphy's* wireless finally got through to Arguello. "We have passed south of you. Give us



*The Brother Bear* nears a recent wreck off Point Conception: It's the *Penelope*, a ketch-rigged motor sailer

our reciprocal. *Delphy*."

The station answered, "You bear 330 degrees true from us."

The *Delphy's* navigators were incredulous. For 330 degrees meant that the squadron was to the north of Arguello. At 8:58 P.M. the message was repeated. The answer indicated that the *Delphy* had moved seven degrees south, but was still north of Point Arguello.

Captain Watson decided to disregard it. As he later sadly testified at the court of inquiry, "I was convinced the station was wrong." He had already given watch-commander Ensign John Morrow his orders.

Up on the bridge Ensign Morrow waited until exactly nine o'clock, then gave the signal for a left turn, two blasts of the whistle, as the quartermaster put the helm over.

The *Delphy* swung to port in a sweeping curve to round the fog-shrouded mass of Point Conception and enter the channel. She was fifteen miles north of her target, speeding into what the men of the Spanish galleons called *La Guijada del Diablo*—the Devil's Jaw.

Behind her, racing at eleven yards a second, their sharp bows hissing through the water, followed the destroyers *S. P. Lee*, the *Young*, the *Woodbury*, the *Nicholas*, the *Farragut*, the *Fuller*, the *Percival*, the *Somers*, the *Chauncey*, the *Kennedy*, the *Paul Hamilton*, the *Stoddert* and

the *Thompson*. The *Delphy* charged straight for the bluff, followed by the next ships in line. Once inside Pedernales Point, with reefs to the right and reefs to the left, no turn could save them. Nothing could save them.

The *Delphy* struck with a grinding roar, piling her bow high on the rocks, followed by the *Young* and the *S. P. Lee*. On the *Delphy's* bridge Ensign Morrow, though hurt and dazed, instinctively sounded the destroyer's siren, perhaps saving half the squadron. The *Young* turned turtle in ninety seconds, hurling her crew into the wild surf. The *Nicholas* struck a reef farther out, marooning her men throughout the night. The *Delphy* soon broke in half, spilling her crew into the sea, though a number of them were able to survive the surf and make it ashore. Lines were rigged from slick rocks to the *Chauncey* and the *S. P. Lee*, enabling many to save themselves by swinging ashore, hand-over-hand. The *Fuller* and the *Woodbury*, impaled on reefs, filled and sank, while the *Somers* and the *Farragut*, though scraping bottom, had been warned off by the siren in time to reverse engines and escape destruction. The rest of the squadron wheeled like a school of frightened fish and stood by helplessly.

Only twenty-three men were lost; considering the magnitude of the disaster, that was a miracle. Many of



the survivors, half-naked, cold, wet, black with oil, built fires on the rocky shore and huddled around them, shivering, as they waited for rescue teams from the station at Arlight. Some began to sing. Soon most of the men had lifted their voices to the tune of "Yes We Have No Bananas," singing "Yes we have no destroyers, we have no destroyers tonight. . . ."

A few officers sat around a nearby fire, but they weren't singing. Captain Watson wept.

**P**ETE spun the wheel as he opened up the diesels. The *Brother Bear* wheeled in a 180-degree turn, roaring southward at thirty knots in the direction from which we had come.

The ships of Squadron Eleven were neither the first nor last to be chewed by the devils who haunt Honda. In 1923 men still spoke of the *Santa Rosa*, caught and crushed within its jaws twelve years before under blue skies in a calm sea.

She was a coastal liner, 326 feet long, elegantly furnished for passenger service. She sailed out of the Golden Gate at 11:20 A.M., July 7, 1911, bound for Los Angeles with 285 souls aboard. Her master, J. O. Faria, after years as a mate, was making his first voyage as captain of his own ship. At dinner that night wine and whiskey flowed freely.

By the small hours of the following morning, most of the passengers had retired to their cabins, lulled by the gentle swells through which the liner cruised under a moonlit sky. Past Purisima Point she kept bearing to port as she followed the coast. Whether she was pressed by unusual currents or tides, or the victim of carelessness, no one could say. Whatever the reason, she plowed into Honda at full speed and crashed on the rocks off Saddle Point. ("The officers," a passenger, J. D. Collins, charged, "were drunk!")

The captain rushed to the bridge. She was hard aground but in no immediate danger of sinking. Stewards and officers assured the alarmed passengers that they'd be transferred to the *President*, another ship of the same line due along that afternoon.

The sun rose bright and warm, the breeze balmy, the seas benevolent. ("They were calm as a lake," Point

Arguello's lighthouse-keeper, H. W. Henderson, testified. "*The Captain must have been crazy not to have saved the passengers that morning. They could have come ashore in row-boats!*")

By the time a couple of lumber ships arrived on the scene, clouds had gathered. The ships put tow lines aboard the *Santa Rosa* and tried to pull her off, but in vain.

By 1 P.M. the sun had vanished behind a grey overcast, the wind was rising, and the surf breaking over the reefs, the ship lurching with every blow. Seasick children and frightened women were beginning to cry. A few nervous stewards tried to reassure them that the *President* had answered their wireless message and was on her way under forced draft.

At 2 P.M. the seas had become even rougher. Several men among the passengers demanded that Captain Faria lower boats and get them ashore. But he remained obdurate.

At 3 P.M. the wind was screaming at forty knots. The *Santa Rosa* had been wrenched broadside to the coastal bluffs. Two of the passengers, J. D. Collins and E. D. Montrose of San Francisco, with a committee of ten other passengers, invaded the bridge. They demanded that the captain at least put the women and children ashore. Some of the women were already hysterical. ("The captain kept babbling," Collins told reporters later, "about the *President* being on her way. If I'd had a gun I'd have shot him down!")

By 3:30 P.M. the tide began to rise, compounding the sea's violence. It was then that Captain Faria finally gave in. He ordered the second and third mates to lower a boat and take a line ashore. The boat had moved hardly fifty feet from the ship's side when a huge wave pitched it upside down. Only Second Mate Houston survived, grabbing a hawser and hauling himself back on deck. A second boat, commanded by Third Engineer Brown, finally made it to shore and helped to rig a breeches buoy. ("The captain fastened his end of the line to the pilot house instead of a high spar," Collins reported. "As a result many passengers reached shore dragged underwater to the point of drowning.")

Just before dark another boat was launched, commanded by Second Mate Houston who had already survived one disastrous launching. This time his luck ran out. His second boat was dashed to bits against the ship's side. All were lost.

As the *Santa Rosa* threatened momentarily to break in two a life raft was hurriedly launched with nineteen women aboard. It managed to get past the ship's bow before it capsized, killing all aboard.

Darkness fell. The ship's steel plates suddenly cracked as she broke in half, both halves wallowing in the surfs, decks awash. Passengers climbed to the roof of the bridge, atop ventilators, and into the rigging, drenched by surf flung high above them. A hundred huddled on the forward section, awaiting rescue on the breeches buoy.

At about 11:30 P.M. with some thirty-five dead and scores injured, Captain Faria bade farewell to his first and probably last command and climbed into the breeches buoy, the last man to go ashore—a traditionalist if nothing else.

**T**HE HOUNDS of Honda have devoured many another vessel. They have a taste, it seems, for Greek freighters, ripping to scrap the *S. S. Ellin* in 1963 and the *Ioannis Kulu-*  
(Continued on page 54)





## A GRAVEYARD OF SHIPS

(Continued from page 39)

*kundis* in 1949. What was left of the latter ship at last came to rest north of Honda near the town of Surf where the largest lumber ship of her time, the *Sybil Marston*, came to grief in 1909. Honda took a double bite one gale-lashed night in May, 1933, chewing up the tanker, *Nippon Maru*, and pursuing to destruction off Point Arguello the freighter *Chehalis*.

Somewhere in the shadowy depths off Point Arguello lies the *Yankee Blade*, a steam packet that went down on October 1, 1854. Aboard were more than 900 passengers and crew. Her cargo included a shipment of \$153,000 in gold specie and an undetermined amount of gold dust and nuggets.

She struck at top speed, tearing out her bottom and almost immediately filling with water. As she lay on the reef Captain Henry Randall and a few of his officers rowed ashore through heavy fog "to find a landing place for survivors."

While they were gone some rough-neck miners joined the seamen in raids on liquor supplies. It was reported they beat and robbed several passengers, then tried for the gold. But it was deep in the hold already swamped.

As the wind rose the *Yankee Blade* began to break up. Passengers began to go over the side, trying to swim

through the roaring surf to reach an invisible shore. Over thirty drowned. The rest hung on in terror until the next day when the weather cleared and the steamer, *Goliah*, happened along. She took off 600, sailed to San Diego, returning the next day to pick up the rest.

Through the ensuing decades numerous divers claimed to have located the wreck, claims which were briefly publicized and soon forgotten. Whether or not any of them found the gold has never been proven.

WE HELD a southeast course past Point Conception, slanting across the glittering breadth of Santa Barbara Channel for some forty miles. Past the nine-mile length of San Miguel Island we turned due south through San Miguel Passage, an ocean corridor two miles wide between San Miguel and Santa Rosa Islands. Once into the open Pacific, we turned southeast along the ocean side of Santa Rosa, following a winding coast of barren bluffs and rocky headlands.

Half the island's fifteen-mile length had slipped behind us before we spied her, propped erect on a granite bier, the massive black corpse of an ocean liner. Years of wind and surf had swung her around, nearly parallel to shore, prow wedged fast on on-shore rocks. As we drew abeam and came about, a hundred yards or so away, the name and home port on her stern stood out clearly: "*Chicka-*

*saw . . . Mobile.*" Her entire hull, we now saw, was curiously humped in the middle.

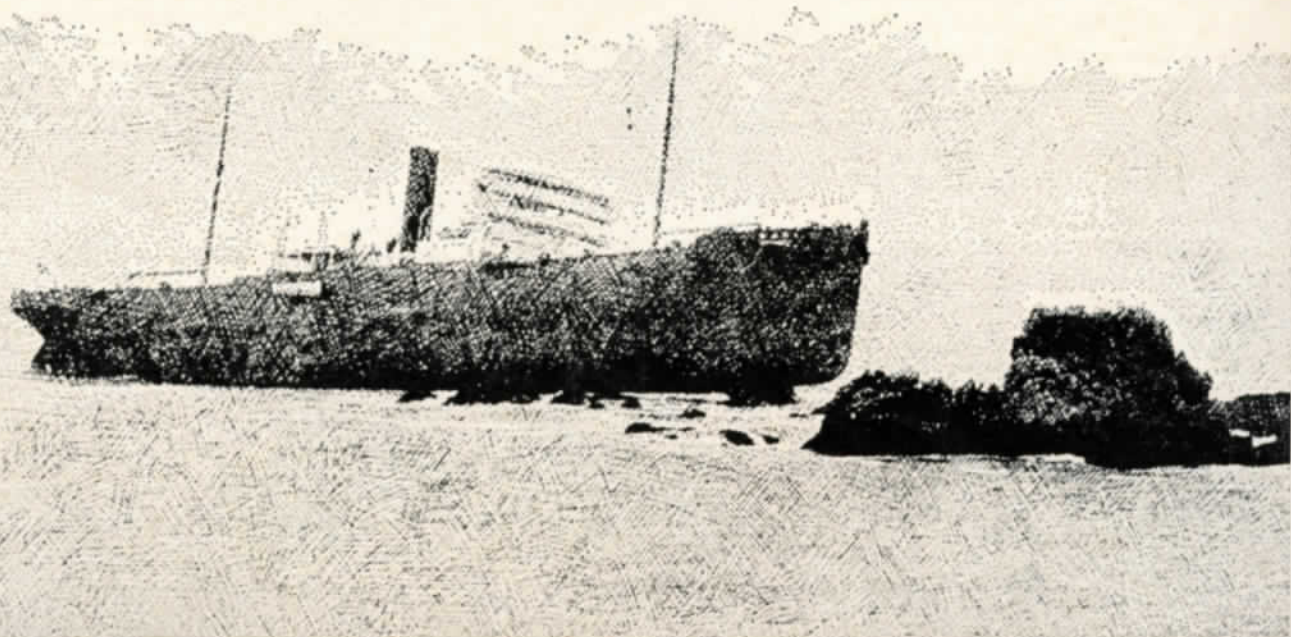
"She's buckling," Pete commented as he let go the anchor. "It's happened since I saw her last." Eventually she would break in two, speeding her final disintegration.

Even more obvious were the monstrous holes in her seaward side, some big enough to drive trucks through. Eight years of surf and storm had taken their toll. Across a section of unbroken plates, in faded, rust-streaked letters was painted a despairing plea: "For Sale."

The three of us crowded into the two-man dinghy, Pete manning the oars. We soon drew alongside the black cliff of the ship's side and moved to one of the lesser holes, about four feet above the waterline. The hole was as large as a house doorway, but the skittish skiff made footing uncertain as I stood up and gripped the rusty edges of the torn metal. One by one we pulled ourselves through the jagged rent into the darkness within, leaving the dinghy tied to a bolt.

The twilight hold seemed as large as a railroad station, its floor thickly cluttered with masses of rusty objects. I picked one up. It was a small, mechanical rabbit that once could hop across the floor when wound up. There were thousands of them all over the hold, together with mechanical pups and frogs and other toys melded in masses of filth.

*The Nippon Maru went aground in a blinding fog in May, 1933*





We stepped carefully through them, peering through the shadows for holes that may have broken through the steel floor. Light from an open hatchway amidships illuminated a vertical iron ladder. Halfway there I cringed to one side, skin prickling. An abyss had suddenly yawned before me, revealing the engine room below. It was well lit by daylight shining through a huge rip, six feet wide.

The iron ladder, bolted to a bulkhead, seemed firm enough. Pete climbed it to the deck above with practiced ease. If it could hold his 220 pounds, I decided, it might hold my 260. So up I went with Larry following at, perhaps, 210. It passed the test without a quiver.

Artificial flowers cluttered this particular hold. Most were made of plastic, some in good condition.

We climbed still another ladder to the deck above. Here staterooms and chartrooms and dining rooms were partitioned on either side of narrow corridors. The footing was especially dangerous, holes more frequent, and a long split, a foot wide, across the ship's middle. A desk in what seemed to have been the master's cabin was littered with documents and shipping forms that identified the *Chickasaw* as a passenger-freighter of the Waterman Line. Playing cards were scattered across a table and coat-hangers strewn across the floor. Here, too, we encountered a minor mystery—a copy of the *Mainichi Daily News*, printed in English in Osaka, Japan, dated Monday, April 10, 1961. Why would Capt. Emmanuel Patronas keep a newspaper already ten months old at the time of the wreck?

Stairs led to the "promenade" deck above, 439 feet of cranes and winches and tangled cables. Across the ship's middle the deck had split in a fissure nearly two feet wide. We stepped across it gingerly, explored the deckhouse, climbed to examine the ruins of the bridge, and enjoyed the warmth of the lowering sun while contemplating the contents of Captain Patronas' manual.

The *Chickasaw* had sailed from Yokohama bound for Wilmington, California, in mid-January, 1962, with five passengers, a crew of forty and 2,000 tons of toys, dishes and

artificial flowers. Some 400 miles west of the California coast the seas rose and the weather thickened. It was part of a storm that was flooding all of southern California.

On Wednesday morning, February 7, the *Chickasaw* was in sight of the Channel Islands—that is, she would have been if it hadn't been for the driving rain and zero visibility. She sailed on a course outside the islands, planning to turn at Anacapa for Los Angeles Harbor, assuming more leeway than she actually had. The southeast sweep of Santa Rosa's coast got in her way. A ten-foot swell carried her to a grinding halt on the island's rocks.

It's a story repeated often enough. For hours the captain would not accept his fate, refusing help while he tried to work his ship off the rocks, the coast guard standing by, patiently waiting. It was futile, of course. On February 8 the seas were enormous and the fate of the *Chickasaw* obvious even to Captain Patronas. Not until February 10 had the storm subsided enough to take off passengers and crew by breeches buoy and helicopter. The *Chickasaw* was then quite dead.

A SMALL but voluble surf soliloquized endlessly upon a fringe of beach gold-plated by the setting sun. Through the rigging overhead a cold wind wailed a soft lament, blending with the stark beauty of this lonely coast to evoke a mood of quiet contemplation. If a ship has to die, this magnificent graveyard of ships, stretching all the way from Purisima Point to Anacapa, is as good a place as any for it.

"Let's get back to our boat," Pete said, "and eat those steaks." WW

Some of the published sources that were used in the preparation of this article and the chart on pages 30-31 are: Shipwrecks of the Pacific Coast by James A. Gibbs, Second Edition, 1962; The Panama Route 1848-1869 by John Haskell Kemble, 1943; "Marine Disasters," a chart of West Coast strandings and wrecks, compiled and traced by Lt. Comdr. W. A. Mason, U.S.N., 1939, Revised 1958; U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey Chart 5020 (San Diego to San Francisco Bay), 10th Ed.



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